

# At home in an abstract world

91-year-old artist  
reflects on world  
of color and shape

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**D**UXBURY — Long before she picked up her first paintbrush, Virginia Mortenson Francis played with colors.

As a young girl she spent hours dressing her dolls in the bright scraps of fabric her great aunt used for patchwork quilts. At her family's Hale-side, Long Island, summer home in Huntington Harbor, N.Y., Francis planted splashy, multi-colored gardens each year.

"I was interested in gardening from the point of view of putting different colors together," said Francis, who started creating her own art in the mid 1950s. Her paintings, prints and collages juxtapose colors to create drama, depth and movement.

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VIRGINIA  
MORTENSON  
FRANCIS

Locally the Duxbury resident's collages can be seen in a one-person show at the Bumpus Gallery in Duxbury through Jan. 2 and in a group exhibition at South Shore Art Center in Cohasset through Dec. 22. Her collages and paintings are displayed at the Plymouth Guild Gallery in Plymouth throughout the year.

Despite her early fascination with color, though, Francis did not consider making art until she was almost 50 and her youngest daughter went off to college. At a friend's urging, she joined a group of Concord women who painted in the fields around their homes. Francis soon realized the group's realistic painting style was not suited to her.

"It was perfectly awful," Francis said of her earliest paintings. "My trees looked like snakes."

When a friend suggested she take lessons at The DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Francis' early assessment of her work was confirmed.

"The teacher told me I had to start at the beginning," she said. "He said to throw [my paintings] all in an ashcan, buy five tubes of paint, take a rag — no brushes — and paint every day for a week with the rag."

Those early rag paintings convinced Francis that abstract art — reminiscent of her early patchwork doll clothes and flower gardens — was her natural genre.

They also brought back childhood memories of conversations with Russian-born composer Sergei Rachmaninoff, who summered near her family's Long Island home.

"Rachmaninoff would allow me to sit on the steps outside the living room where his grand piano was, and listen to

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Currier Gallery in Manchester, N.H., her alma mater, Smith College in Northampton, and the Junior League of Boston.

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him practice," Francis said. "One day he said to me, 'Listen to this old Russian folk song,' and then he proceeded to weave part of that melody into the concerto he was working on. A theme running through the concerto was abstracted from the folk song and you could catch some of the melody now and then. Abstract painting is like that.

"Non-objective paintings are different," she said. "There are no familiar themes running through them to give them direction. They unfold by themselves and, when they are successful, they become a harmonious whole. ... I don't think abstract or non-objective painting is the only way to paint. But it's the only way I can paint."

At the retirement community in Duxbury where Francis lives and has taught collage classes, she is often asked to explain the meaning of abstract painting and why an artist would choose to paint that way.

"The answer is that we think about painting differently," she tells her students. "We do not want the viewer to take in the painting at a glance. Rather, we try to make the painting so arresting, so interesting, or beautiful, or even puzzling, that the viewer will come back and back to discover what he can find."

Francis followed the same impulse when she started printmaking in the mid 1960s.

After her first husband died, she bought a press and established a printmaking atelier in her Concord home. It was one way to fill the empty house with lively people. Her Hubbard Street Printmakers boasted eight members. Eventually, they each bought their own presses and continued their printmaking careers on their own.

By that time Francis had married a childhood friend,

## FYI

Abstract collage paintings by Virginia Mortenson Francis can be viewed at the following locations:

Cohasset: "Work in Abstraction" an exhibit of work by gallery artists through Dec. 22 at South Shore Art Center, 118 Ripley Road. Call (617) 388-ARMS.

Duxbury: One person show at the Helen Bump's Gallery, Duxbury Free Library, Alden Street, through Jan. 2. Call (617) 924-2721.

Plymouth: Ongoing exhibition of work by gallery artists at Plymouth Guild Gallery, 226 Water St., Plymouth. Call (603) 746-7637.

Lewis W. Francis, and moved back to Brooklyn Heights where she had grown up. Her printing press was moved to his family's summer home in Quisset on Cape Cod where Virginia Francis pursued her artwork for 25 years, first during vacations then full time.

When bursitis from years of strenuous printmaking forced her to sell her press, Francis turned to collage, a medium well-suited to the smaller studio in the Duxbury home where she and her husband live.

"I use the material as though it were paint. I use magazines, or paint paper or crayon it," she said. "I improvise. I'm led by something to the next move. ... It's mainly matching up color and shape. They're all designs and color."



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM LANDERS

The Bumpus Gallery in Duxbury is displaying the work of Duxbury artist Virginia Mortenson Francis, including "Revelation" (behind her), through Jan. 2.